

May 31, 2015

TITLE: Youth Sunday 2015

My message this morning is different than usual. It's addressed mostly to the youth, but I invite the rest of you to listen in. I was asked to share some words of wisdom with the teenagers from ELPC—a charge of sorts to the graduating seniors. I speak mostly from my own experiences...

Before I left for college, I had never heard of the internet or email. Freshman orientation included an introduction to these two tools, but most talk about the Internet was about its potential and not its present. We were a long way from having any answer we'd desire at our fingertips, literally, always. The most amazing technology was that we now had answering machines that would allow you to dial into them from another landline to listen to your messages, so you could see if anyone called you while you were still away.

When I went off to college, I wanted to be a reporter and a writer, and so I started college as an English major. But in many ways I held back. I had loved High School and my friends and my family, and I think I wasn't ready to let go. So it took awhile for me to really commit myself to college—to claim it as my community without longing for weekend trips to Pittsburgh to see the friends I left behind.

I confess that I did not have the best attitude when it came to academics. When a class felt somewhat easy to me, I paid it very little attention and ended up selling myself short on the grade department. I remember looking at a student in my freshman seminar with a judgmental eye when she anxiously kept asking the professor, "What do I need to do to get an A?" when he was introducing a new model of learning where we would collaborate with our professor on determining our grades. How could she just not see the opportunity? She did, however, graduate Suma Cum Laude—in the elite tier of students with the highest overall grades. I did not.

Frankly, I had been more afraid than I would have liked to admit. When an older student told me that the dance classes at Allegheny were all modern dance, I shied away from signing up, even though dance was something I loved to do. Learning a new technique made me feel self-conscious. When the editor of the campus newspaper called with an assignment the first week of school, I declined the assignment, feeling like I barely knew my way around the campus yet—I surely didn't have the expertise needed to actually report on campus life. I realized in hind-sight, that I closed myself off from some potentially enriching experiences—and from an opportunity to develop my gifts—because I let nerves stand in my way.

Eventually I got it together. I threw myself into my new friendships, my classes and the larger community there. I sought ways to connect the learnings of real life with the teachings in the classroom and designed my own major. Eventually I learned that the best way to engage a new situation, to make friends and to make a difference, is, quite frankly, to get involved.

But you know that already.

You each have jumped into the community at ELPC with gusto, looking for more ways to jump in and lend a hand each year. I have known many of you since your young childhood, when you would sit on these steps—after climbing through the secret passage way under the pulpit, that is. Each year as you have grown you have seized opportunities to be a part of this community and a part of the Body of Christ by offering your gifts, talents, hopes and insights for the common good. Whether you collect the offering or run the dishwasher in the kitchen, you know this place inside and out. And we are better for it.

I know that community is important to you. It has been important to each of you to be a part of the community of youth that has checked in at Sunday School each week, slept overnight for the 30 Hour Famine, washed cars in anticipation of the summer Mission Trip, played hide-n-go seek in teams, together. It has been important to you, together, to serve others—to read scripture, to emcee the talent show at the retreat, to ring bells, run sound, help kids at VCS, haul dirt at Garfield Farm, to demo houses with Open Hand Ministry, to make care packages for kids in college, serve as a Deacon or Elder and more. Community has shaped each one of you—the community of youth at ELPC, the community of ELPC as a whole, the community of Pittsburgh.

I want to let you know that I give thanks for your God-given gifts and for all that you contribute to this community and to the world. You are not the future of the church—you are the present of the church. You make a difference now. You make us better because you are a part of this body of Christ. You enrich us, challenge us, help us to be better—and help us to serve God and others with enthusiasm, wisdom, joy and love. You invite us into the justice of God as you share your insights and hopes about how you expect the world to work.

Wherever you go and whatever you do, I pray that you remember that the foundation of your identity comes from Christ—who accepted you, who forgave you, who called you friend. But remember, too, that Christ calls you into community wherever you are: to welcome the outcast, to befriend the stranger, to forgive the enemy, to work together for the healing of the world. Whether you are working within the community of ELPC, or stepping out into the larger world, know that in Christ you are never alone and you always have something to offer.

YOU are the body of Christ, and individually members of it. When other people try to tell you who you should be or how you should act remind yourself of this truth. YOU are the body of Christ—whenever you experience doubt or worry, comfort yourself with the knowledge that you are a part of something bigger than yourself, something beautiful. You are the body of Christ.

Some of you are heading off to college – some, even to my alma mater! Some of you are advancing to a new grade, looking ahead to learning to drive, getting jobs, going off to camp. I want to give you the advice I wish I had taken when I was your age.

Seize every moment. Life moves fast and these days are precious. Live into each moment, face each new experience with a pioneering spirit. Have adventures with your friends, cry when you read the end of *Of Mice and Men*, taste new food, learn new

languages, engage new ideas. Jump into each moment with an openness to the possibility that you might be transformed—and that your commitment to justice might just change the world.

May each present moment be grounded in the foundation of your past—of your parents' love, the values of your faith, the support of this community... But may each present moment be grounded in the promise of your future. Make choices that will situate you for a bright and courageous tomorrow. Be kind to other people. Study hard. Know that future employers can see what you post on line.

I want to encourage you to be confident, but not arrogant. Keep learning about yourself—and keep learning about other people—with an appreciation for the gifts you each bring to the larger world. Remember the words of the biblical text you chose for today. Remember that you all have gifts that are essential ingredients for the well-being of the larger community. Remember that you have a contribution to make. And don't forget that we are all at our best when we work together. Offer your gifts with joy. And give thanks for the contributions of others. Collaborate more than you compete. Find the good in everyone, including yourself. It's in there.

And don't let fear hold you back. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Don't be afraid to try something new. Don't be afraid to have your heart broken. Don't be afraid to stand up for what's right, even if it's the unpopular choice. Don't be afraid to be yourself. Don't be afraid to be judged. And remember that if people don't accept you, it is usually because they are afraid of being themselves.

You are the Body of Christ. You are not just the future of the church, but it's present. I love that. You are the body of Christ here and now. And you are God's great gift to the church. For that, I praise God every single day.

And now, because your actions speak louder than words, I invite Wayne to cue the slideshow as our gift to the congregation.